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Big Brother In The Snooping Business

The weekly newsletter circulated among newspaper subscribers to UPI carried a message from Vice-President and Editor Roger Tatarian which is worth reproducing:

"In the 1960s, it was the campaign of the bar associations to restrict court coverage that occupied journalistic meetings and publications. In the 1970s, it may turn out to be the efforts of government to turn the press into a sort of Trojan Horse for its own purposes.

"That may be a case of overreaction and overstatement. Indeed, I hope it turns out to be just that. But there are disturbing implications nevertheless in two items in the news this week:

"CBS was served with a federal court subpoena demanding that it produce for a grand jury investigation (1) both the used and unused portions of films made for a program on the Black Panther party, and (2) all notes, correspondence, memoranda and records of telephone calls made in arranging the program. The material sought included an interview filmed in Algeria with Eldridge Cleaver, the fugitive Black Panther leader. The grand jury, sitting in San Francisco, is considering the case of a Panther accused of threatening the life of the President in a Moratorium Day speech Nov. 15.

"It was disclosed in Saigon that four Army agents, using fraudulent letters of accreditation from a publishing service, had been issued press cards by the U.S. high command. The agents had planned to mingle with the

regular press corps to determine whether and how reporters got information that had not been issued officially. It must be stated that the U.S. high command itself disclosed the story with the statement saying those who accredited the phony agents had been 'admonished.'

"It would not be difficult to dismiss the latter episode as one of those things if there were any assurance that it had never happened before. Unfortunately, there can be no acceptable assurance in an area where deception is the mark of success. So all we have for sure is confirmation that this particular effort to use the press as a cover for something else failed.

"The notion that the American press corps abroad is infested with CIA and other agents is firmly held in many foreign countries. This confirmation that a U.S. agency did indeed try to plant its operatives in the press corps is not going to make life any easier for American reporters in some foreign capitals.

"In the CBS case, it is the scope of the subpoena that causes concern. Put in terms of a newspaper, the issue is whether a reporter should be compelled to make public more than he feels proper, and, specifically, whether he should be forced to release material which he may have obtained in confidence or on an off-the-record basis. There may or may not be confidential material in the CBS dossier. The point is that the subpoena does not even recognize that there might be.

"When people involved in controversy speak to reporters now, they do so with some measure of trust. They accept the reporter as an agent of the public-at-large. The danger here is that unrestricted use of the subpoena can begin to give newsmen the image of being agents of a different kind. The resultant suspicion would reduce the contacts a reporter could make in his search for information and would, in the long run, work only against the public interest."

What Mr. Tatarian is saying is that once the gates are down, once Big Brother gets that foot into the sacred door of press freedom, in the name of national interest or whatever — the public will become the big — and we mean big — loser.